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SUBJECT: CANDIDATES DISCUSS PLATFORMS AND ELECTORAL PROCESS
WITH CODEL ELLSWORTH

REF: KABUL 1738

¶1. SUMMARY: On July 1, Ambassador Eikenberry hosted a roundtable for the members of CODEL Ellsworth with four presidential candidates standing in the August elections. The Ambassador, Ambassador Ricciardone and Rep. Ellsworth focused their comments on U.S. support for a secure, credible and inclusive election for the Afghan people. The candidates, Mirwais Yaseni, Sayed Jalal, Mowlana Abdul Qadir Imami Ghori and Dr. Habib Mangal, each discussed their views on the election process and provided a brief overview of their platforms. Common themes included the need for improved governance, anti-corruption reform, merit-based hiring, building of Afghan security forces and reconciliation with the Taliban. End Summary.

¶2. The Ambassador opened the event by encouraging open discourse on the issues as a key aspect of the campaign season. Rep. Ellsworth noted the importance of the election in supporting peace and democracy, not only in Afghanistan but in the region and across the world. He commended the dedication of the candidates and their willingness to take on the difficult duty of public service during difficult times. He turned the event over to the candidates, noting that the United States wanted to work with the Afghan people to build peace and prosperity in Afghanistan.

Yaseni - Reformation, Not Opposition

¶3. Yaseni spoke first for the candidates, reiterating his comments made previously to the Embassy (reftel) that the need for change and improved democracy compelled him to stand in the election. His candidacy is based on a desire for reform, not opposition. He cited good governance as his highest priority and to that end his administration would operate within and not above the law, in contrast to the Karzai administration's actions. He identified anti-corruption efforts, including counter-narcotics, as critical to success and stated his commitment to a merit-based distribution of power and meaningful presence of women in government. He separated militant and non-militant Taliban, seeing negotiation with the former as a necessity as well as improving the relationship with Pakistan.

¶4. On the election process, Yaseni said that the IEC is doing well overall and targeting key groups such as women and youth. He noted candidates have a role in ensuring the fairness of the election by reporting incidents or possible fraud to the proper authorities. In a conversation with poloff prior to the roundtable, he noted that private media outlet TOLO was providing the best coverage, followed by state-run RTA, with Arianna and Shamshad actively biased against him and other opposition candidates. However, he thought that the IEC, the international community, the media and the candidates all working together would bring about transparency.

¶ 15. Jalal identified economic reform as a core principle in his strategy to bring peace and prosperity to Afghanistan. He suggested changing the definition of "terrorism" to allow for negotiation in support of reconciliation efforts; anyone who targeted civilians would retain the label. Jalal also highlighted the need to build democratic institutions, a free and independent press, improve womens' rights and human rights records and reiterated the need for economic reform.

¶ 16. Jalal asserted that the IEC regulation preventing the use of public property for campaign events - eliminating venues such as schools, mosques, universities, etc - effectively prevented candidates from holding large scale events due to prohibitive costs involved in renting a private space. He noted that television and radio airtime was also expensive, working to silence the voices of the opposition. He stated that the IEC's policy of allowing candidate agents in polling stations as observers was unhelpful, as few candidates would be able to recruit sufficient supporters to act as agents. Jalal thought that private media outlets, such as TOLO and Arianna, were providing impartial campaign coverage, but that RTA's 20-minute spots for candidates were insufficient.

Mangal - Poverty Reduction and Good Governance

¶ 17. Mangal thanked the United States for its support of
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Afghan democracy and the political process, human rights, development and anti-insurgent efforts. He said that Afghanistan and the international community could overcome challenges by working together. He identified improvement in governance and government, specifically improving security, reducing corruption and poverty and implementing social services as the basis of his platform, noting that in the seven years since the Bonn conference, the government has made insufficient progress in providing services, support and stability to the people. Mangal emphasized the need to build Afghan security forces to improve their defensive capacity and enable international troops to withdraw. He focused on the need to continue reconstruction and development and reduce the number of Afghans living in poverty. He asserted that his administration would fight corruption by placing strong leaders in government office and improve rule of law by hiring qualified, individuals based on merit. This would enable a strong government, focused on improving democracy and human rights.

¶ 18. Mangal alleged that evidence exists that some candidates were using government resources for campaigns, implying but not naming Karzai. He said fair coverage in the media was not possible and personal security for candidates remained a concern. He also cited the need for Afghan National Security Forces and ISAF to coordinate to provide security for the elections. He appreciated President Obama's clear policy of the U.S. neither supporting nor opposing any legitimate candidate and expressed hope that the policy would remain in place.

Ghori - Explain Policy Through Islam

¶ 19. Beginning with a prolonged commentary on the current administration, Ghori asserted that a weak and corrupt government was the core of Afghanistan's problems with the bad attitude of government officials driving Afghans to terrorism. Ghori, an Islamic religious and legal scholar, noted that the religious aspects of Afghan society had allowed bad religious leaders to lead people astray and

Karzai's poor understanding of Islam made him unable to counter religious leaders. Instead, a leader should ensure the people understand that Afghanistan's democratic goals were compatible with Islam. He believed the Afghan people were ready for change and a continued Karzai government would lead to a coup and the departure of international forces. He expressed concern about the fairness of the election, citing public distrust of Karzai and his family and questioning support for a candidate that the people did not trust. He said there were inconsistencies about Karzai's statements regarding his campaign finances and asked the U.S. and international community to help prevent election fraud.

¶10. To reform the government and eliminate corruption, Ghori would move to a merit-based hiring system and divide the power of the government by creating a Prime Minister. He would respect the power of parliament, citing the continued work of Foreign Minister Spanta despite parliament's vote against him as evidence of Karzai's disdain for divided power. He wanted to strengthen Afghan security forces, provide them with better weapons and put in place universal, male conscription at age 22. He believed that by proving that the government represented Islamic values, the Taliban would lose power and influence. He also expressed the desire to improve the country's infrastructure with factories and hydro-power, development of natural resources and improve relations with neighbors.

Democracy Is Our Candidate

¶11. Ambassador Ricciardone responded to the candidates statements by reiterating that transparency, legitimacy and democracy were the only "candidates" supported by the United States. Rep. Ellsworth, on behalf of the CODEL, reminded the group that while elected officials come and go, the integrity of the process would stay with the Afghan people.

¶12. CODEL Ellsworth was unable to clear this message before departing.
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